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## Gender and Queer Fan Labor on Tumblr

*The Case of BBC's Sherlock*

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**ABSTRACT** Dominated by LGBTQ+ and female-identified fans from various backgrounds, Tumblr blogs dedicated to queer readings of the BBC television series *Sherlock* (2010–ongoing) are a breeding ground for less-discussed forms of unremunerated queer labor: utopian, heuristic, and care work. In their digital fanworks, Tumblr queer users marry crafts associated with domestic heterosexual femininity (collage and scrapbooking) with established female fan practices (slashing and shipping) to articulate complex sexual and gender identities and navigate neuro-divergent mental health statuses. This article examines the shifts real-time digital interactivity and transmedia storytelling have introduced to viewer/producer power relations. Unpacking “queer cryptography” as a form of reception labor offers a feminist reading of the diverse modes of LGBTQ+ identification, kinship, and activism performed by queer female viewers on Tumblr, while questioning the vulnerability and possible exploitation of the unsanctioned affective labor produced by such a desperately underrepresented demographic. **KEYWORDS** BBC, girl fans, queer labor, *Sherlock*, television, Tumblr

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Here I am leaving you clues. . . . We are all going forward. None of us are going back.

—RICHARD SIKEN, “SNOW AND DIRTY RAIN”<sup>1</sup>

When asked how the “hardcore fans” of the BBC show *Sherlock* (2010–ongoing) “express their passion,” co-creator Steven Moffat responded: “Gay porn, mainly. A lot of that.”<sup>2</sup> Since its debut in 2010, the critically acclaimed British series has been known for attracting a global legion of female fans. Moffat’s reply simultaneously recognizes and disavows the passionate fan investment of that female demographic, reducing their “hardcore” viewer engagement to the fetishization of male-male (m/m) sexuality. Analyzing posts and digital art created by the *Sherlock* Tumblr community—specifically a slice of fandom aggregating thousands of female- and queer-identified fans, many in their teens and twenties—I propose that, far from pornographic or self-indulgent, girl fans’ reading of

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John Watson and Sherlock Holmes as queer and in love is deliberate and self-empowering, the result of a form of free fan labor rarely recognized but constantly stimulated by contemporary television producers: that of queer cryptography.

By “queer cryptography” I mean a cluster of reception practices that LGBTQ+ audiences have historically been forced to devise in order to eke out subtextual representation from an overabundance of canonical heterosexual narratives. As the etymology suggests, “cryptography” is the art of making meaning out of ciphers, of extracting content from between the lines, of rendering communication secure in hostile environments. In the context of this article, queer cryptography signifies the marriage of pre-internet queer reception practices (such as subtextual scanning, slashing, and simultaneous translation) and traditional female occupations (handcrafts and care work) with new digital technologies (including GIF making, blog posting, and vidding).<sup>3</sup> For a segment of *Sherlock*’s Tumblr community, however, the belief that the series would culminate in a m/m romance by season 4 added urgent layers to their cryptographic labor. For these nonnormative viewers, the television text became a lens through which they advocated for LGBTQ+ rights, mental health awareness, and queer utopianism. This article tracks the losses and gains such deeply affective, openly splayed, communally woven forms of reception labor can wield.

Because terminology is instrumental to *Sherlock* fans and Tumblr users alike, I must clarify that by “queer” I mean individuals who self-characterize as outside the presumption of compulsory heterosexuality and the expectation of heteronormativity, either due to their sexual preferences (bisexual, gay, pansexual, asexual, et cetera) or their gender identity (trans, nonbinary, agender). The term is also applied to describe users not compliant with dominant notions of neurotypicality, which includes those with anxiety, social or mood disorders, body dysmorphia, development disorders (such as autism), and other neurological divergences. I further use “queer” as a locution to convey deliberately subversive reception practices that deploy the “radical potential” of queer insight to disrupt assumed heteronormative structures of narrative romance, spectatorial pleasure, and viewership address.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the context of this paper, “queer” describes both the fans and the current reading practices employed by a worldwide community of LGBTQ+ aligned viewers.

That is not to say that *Sherlock* fans are exclusively queer. Due to its enormous popularity, many of show’s followers self-characterize as heterosexual, cis male, or neurotypical. However, my research on the Tumblr community dedicated to Sherlock and John’s love story (a community known as “Johnlock”)

suggests that an overwhelming majority of fans identify as female-born and subscribe to a queer identity.<sup>5</sup> This includes young trans men and asexual/agender people. I must add that, in my eighteen months of observation-participation on Tumblr, I have never encountered a member of the Johnlock community who identified as heteronormative and cis male.<sup>6</sup>

Using *Sherlock*'s Tumblr fandom as an entry point, I thus set out to explore the ways a new generation of non-heteronormative television viewers combines old reading practices with social media to produce resonant queer content. My notion of queer cryptography is energized by the dialogic mode of address currently established between television fans and creators, and largely abetted by the wide spread of social media platforms. I argue that transmedia storytelling and real-time access to media producers changed queer fans' expectations and readings of homoerotic subtexts. *Sherlock*'s queer Tumblr community demonstrates that explicit LGBTQ+ representation is now not only expected by fans—it is demanded. In fact, unlike their predecessors, current queer viewers do not think of their reception labor as extraneous; rather, they view it as ancillary to that of the official creators. For many of the fans discussed in this article, unpaid queer labor—from critical analyses to collages and videos—presumably supports, as much as heralds, the future production of queer media representation.

I propose that such reception practices are labor—emotional, creative, therapeutic, often unremunerated and unappreciated labor. My argument builds upon the work of media scholars such as Tiziana Terranova and Mark Andrejevic, who tease out the nuanced contradictions and insidious loopholes underpinning an age of media production marked by the increasing digital outsourcing of creative labor and the online interactivity between official producers and fan-makers—innovations that galvanize as much as blur distinctions between paid work and free (read, unsanctioned and unwaged) fan labor. Building upon Terranova's famous assertion that although "not compensated by great financial reward . . . fan labor is not necessarily exploited labor," I suggest that most fan labor may be monetarily unpaid, but that that does not make it unlimitedly "free," nor does it exclude it from being valued and granted recognition by network executives, TV showrunners, writers, actors, and other media affiliates.<sup>7</sup> As Andrejevic shrewdly observes, a majority of online fans "may be working for free, but that does not mean they are not producing value."<sup>8</sup>

At turns joyous and grievous, queer fan labor can easily enable its own exploitation. Unlike its heteronormative counterpart, queer fan labor is commonly driven by a high-stakes quest for identarian valorization, cultural legitimization, and positive media representation. A hunger made of starvation

predisposes queer fan labor to be simultaneously undervalued and exploited by showrunners and publicists.<sup>9</sup> Such exploitation may not always take a financial shape, nor is it necessarily as direct as industry officials stealing fans' intellectual property, disallowing them royalties and credit, or not remunerating website moderators and survey takers. Exploitation of free fan labor, like the concept of labor itself, is fluid and circumstantial, riddled with interpretable gray areas. So in the realm of queer fan labor, collective pain more than material loss becomes the gauge through which a researcher can measure abuse and injury.

Drawing on the notion of corporate exploitation sketched by television scholar Judith Fathallah, I argue that deliberately misleading marketing ploys targeting LGBTQ+ consumers, such as "queerbaiting," fall under a capitalistic form of labor exploitation. Fathallah defines queerbaiting as a harmful "television strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes."<sup>10</sup>

Maliciously encouraging the emotional, interpretative, and managerial labor of queer fans (unpaid work that may range from campaigning across digital platforms for the renewal of endangered shows to marketing official events through social media) is a form of capitalist exploitation, not so much because fans are not being financially paid for their efforts and time, but because they are not being granted full clarity and insight. This lack of corporate transparency complicates the notion that queer fans' voluntary labor is being given knowingly and willingly.

A strategy of precision marketing, queerbaiting zeroes in on a vulnerable demographic and manipulates its longing for media representation for maximal profit with no regard for personal injury. It is an exploitative technique because it banks on fan labor achieved through deceitful means—the promise of explicit LGBTQ+ media representation when this was never intended to be provided. By apparently promising what will not be delivered and tricking consumers into an investment with no possibility of return, queerbaiting muddies the waters of consent (both emotional and financial). That is why, when compared with an ethical business model, queerbaiting can be interpreted as a violation of the implicit contract between sellers (TV networks and showrunners) and their targeted customers (LGBTQ+ viewers). A deliberate mixture of false advertising, gaslighting, and abuse of consumer trust, queerbaiting is, in sum, both unethical and wrongful.

Queer fan labor is fascinating exactly because it operates on this razor's edge: its plentifulness and hopefulness binds communities together, but can also be easily appropriated by corporations and turned against queer consumers. A utopian deference to a time "not yet here" is therefore both its strength and its vulnerability. The following pages trace the ways *Sherlock's* queer viewers strive to include "queer utopianism" into everyday life through fan praxis. The community is motivated by the luminous belief that transforming John and Sherlock into a couple on prime-time television will help build a "better tomorrow" for historically marginalized viewers, namely a young generation of neuro-divergent and non-heteronormative people. This hopeful projection of queer fruition into a "forward-dawning" time and representation intimately dialogues with José Esteban Muñoz's proposition that "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us [queer audiences] to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."<sup>11</sup>

Framed by these ideas, I interrogate if queer fan labor can ever be properly rewarded. Can the immense emotional and temporal deposits pumped into thousands of critical analyses and fanworks in the quest for queer-positive media representation ever become a zero-sum game? Or, since most media is designed as textually heteronormative, is queer fan labor innately primed for overdraw? Can queer viewers ever choose to be "passive" watchers, or is finding pleasure and identification in TV consumption contingent on them acting as engaged decoders, translators, and even caregivers? For if a long-running show fails to deliver the much-awaited explicit representation, is not queer fan labor tasked to rescue the community from the fallout, and—under the guise of care work—to symbolically bandage the wounded? And lastly, since queer fan labor is usually fueled by a vested interest in cultural legitimization, can there be such a thing as "invulnerable" queer reception labor—labor that is not bone deep, love that, when unrequited, does not hurt on an identarian level?

Shining a spotlight on *Sherlock's* Tumblr community also throws into relief the added disempowerment encumbering fan-makers who identify as queer *and* female. Emotional and creative fan labor has historically been devalued through its associations with young femininity, a social identity codified as overly sentimental and amateurish. Queer audiences have suffered a similar othering by media industries, being consistently imagined as a demographic outside the normative whole. Like girls, queer people are often signified by their excessiveness: aesthetic, affective, bodily, and sexual.

My use of the neologism "girl fan" is thus consciously charged. In the context of this article, the moniker deliberately defies age brackets, being applied to

describe female-identified fans in their teens and early twenties, as well as thirtysomethings and middle-aged bloggers. By inverting the word order and placing “girl” as the lead qualifier (the noun preceding the pejorative descriptor “fanatic”), I labor to counteract the distorted universalization of “fangirls” as teenage media consumers defined by pathological puerility, undiscerning lust, and aspired heteronormativity.<sup>12</sup> A searing example of the pervasive cultural misogyny linchpinning the marriage of girlhood, fandom, and queerness can be found in an article in British *GQ* magazine. In 2013, the male-gearred publication likened twenty thousand teenage girls attending a One Direction concert to “a hormone bomb gone off,” the enthusiastic crowd reduced to “a dark-pink oil slick that howls and moans and undulates with every impish crotch-thrust from their [male] idols.”<sup>13</sup> *GQ*’s disturbing language perpetuates the devaluing of female fans as boy-crazy teenagers, an essentialist misconception often crystallized around “Directioners” coupling band members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson in a same-sex relationship.

Far from isolated, Directioners’ pairing of two male celebrities in their erotic fanworks participates in a well-established female fan praxis. Female media consumers have been queering male media icons coded as heterosexual for decades, as studies on *Star Trek* slash writing and girl-led online fandoms surrounding *Supernatural* (WB/CW, 2005–ongoing) and the *Harry Potter* franchise have amply shown.<sup>14</sup> Writing on the pleasures female audiences derive from gazing at m/m imagery, filmmaker Kobena Mercer argues that “the gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object.”<sup>15</sup> Media theorist Laura Marks adds that, from a psychoanalytical feminist standpoint, “to look sexually at men [straight female viewers] must masquerade as a gay man, i.e., provisionally borrow a gay male gaze. Gay porn offers me a way to look at men, overtly sexually, without being looked back at, or [being] pulled into a heterosexual power relation that would inevitably disadvantage me.”<sup>16</sup>

Mercer’s and Marks’s perspectives return us to Moffat’s opening quote. It is interesting to think that female audiences delight in m/m representation as a means to find respite from traditional gender-fixed relational roles, since male power dynamics are culturally construed as inherently equitable or flexible. However, like most scholarship on women’s engagement with male slash, the abovementioned voices assume that the female gaze is, by definition, heterosexual.<sup>17</sup> This article explores what modes of fan labor and identification emerge when non-heteronormative female viewers are the ones consuming and queering

media representations of male intimacy. Drawing from long-term immersive research, I introduce a collective of female viewers and young online users who self-identify as queer *and* as finding pleasurable agency in dialoging with televisual representations of m/m desire—due not to a one-dimensional fetishization of the male body or male homosexuality (as *GQ* and Moffat suggest), but to a complex system of positive identification and therapeutic work, afforded by communally retooling popular media images of nonnormative masculinity.

#### **DREAMING FORWARD: THE JOHNLOCK CONSPIRACY, QUEER UTOPIAN ACTIVISM, AND FAN PROTEST LABOR**

In the popular imagination, both *Sherlock* and Tumblr are linked with girl fans. Case in point: when at the 2016 Comic-Con, star Benedict Cumberbatch promised that “love conquers all” in *Sherlock*’s upcoming season, moderator Chris Hardwick interjected: “And Tumblr just got pregnant!” To which Cumberbatch quickly retorted, “Again!” reinforcing the perceived ties between reproductive femininity, the social platform, and the BBC series.

Tumblr is a pivotal point in the current articulation of queer utopianism and marginalized fan labor. In its ethos, Tumblr is heir to LiveJournal, the go-to site where young people congregated to perform a germinal sense of identity, personal taste, civic advocacy, and fandom (particularly fanfiction writing) during the 2000s. By 2015, however, Tumblr had replaced LiveJournal as the primary home for online fan communities.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Twitter (which primarily connects fans to celebrities) or Facebook (linking friends and family), Tumblr brings together strangers through shared ideologies, causes, aesthetics, and media preferences. In a format that is a cross between personal journal and virtual scrapbook, Tumblr blogs are typically arranged by theme, a structure that encourages niche taste communities. Further, since Tumblr markets itself as a specialized venue for expressing one’s “micro” individuality—inviting users to customize their preferred gender pronouns, sexual orientation, and even personality type following the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator—bloggers came to perceive the site as a “queer ecosystem.”<sup>19</sup> Many Tumblr bloggers take pride in conflating their non-heteronormative status with their social platform of choice, quipping that “Tumblr has made us forget that some people are actually straight.”<sup>20</sup> Users on Reddit, IMDb, and other heterosexual- and male-dominated discussion sites confirm the “feminization” and “queering” of Tumblr, recurrently deriding it for being overrun by “irrational Millennial fangirls . . . with a knack for fetishizing homosexuality.”<sup>21</sup>

Similar to Tumblr, *Sherlock*’s relationship with queerness is elemental and symbiotic. The procedural drama based on Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories

follows the adventures of two thirtysomething professional men, Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Dr. John Watson (Martin Freeman), who live together and solve crimes in present-day London. Not only is its source material the detective story—a genre defined by peppering the narrative with clues for readers to interpret—but its updated text is riddled with homoerotic double entendres and a slew of characters who refuse to conform to binary forms of sexual and romantic identification. There is Jim Moriarty (Andrew Scott), the legendary archenemy who is first introduced by “playing gay” for Sherlock in “The Great Game” (2010), and whose ongoing interactions with the sleuth never lose the rhetoric of sexual courtship. (In “The Abominable Bride” [2016], for example, Moriarty tells Sherlock, “I like your rooms, they smell so *manly*.”) There is Irene Adler (Lara Pulver), a dominatrix who professes to be “gay” only to court Sherlock in a battle of wits. There is John Watson’s repeated proclamations of “not being gay” whenever mistaken for Sherlock’s “date,” though his denial of homosexuality does not confirm his heterosexuality (as the declarative statement “I am straight” would), hence leaving open the possibility for bisexuality. And there is the detective himself who, though never explicitly stated, is for all intents and purposes coded as a gay man, from his constant assertions that “girlfriends are not my area” to his all-consuming devotion to John, who is described in the narrative as Sherlock’s “damsel in distress.”

Suffused with queer coding and innuendo, it is understandable why *Sherlock* has engaged thousands of sexually questioning viewers across the globe. In fact, cracking the queer subtexts coded into scripts, set designs, scores, and performances, and following these breadcrumbs to the male protagonists’ “incidental love affair,” sustains the creative labor and intellectual engagement of queer fans during the show’s unusually long hiatuses. As Carla, a seventeen-year-old cis lesbian fan, joyfully admits, “Exposing sherlock’s gay ass is what i do for a living.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Sherlock* Tumblr fandom, however, is vast, heterogeneous, and contentious. The struggle to pin down Sherlock’s and John’s sexualities is an incendiary force, revealing the complicated roles that love and sex play in culturally defining gender, fandom, and sexual identification. A self-professed “radical” slice of the Tumblr community dubbed TJLC (acronym for The Johnlock Conspiracy) offers a unique case study on the interpretive labor strategies deployed by a young generation of queer-identified fans in the quest for cultural legitimization and relatable media representation. Spontaneously formed on Tumblr in January 2014, this outspoken group of self-described feminist queer viewers (most in their teens and twenties) firmly believed that the BBC show was deliberately scripted as a “slow burn” love story between a gay Sherlock and



a bisexual John, and that the romance would become explicit in season 4, scheduled to be released in January 2017.<sup>23</sup> TJLCers further contended that, by employing a queer cryptographic lens, any viewer could decode the inevitable romantic outcome.<sup>24</sup>

TJLCers' strand of queer utopian activism permeates all modes of relationality, discourse, and artistic labor generated by members of this online fan collective. Queer utopianism renders them singular as well as inflexible and contradictory, at once campaigning for LGBTQ+ equality and diversity while at the same time aggressively policing any dissident interpretations fans may have of the show. Such ambivalence is as much a by-product of transmedia storytelling as of digital interactivity and its resulting hive-mind absolutism. TJLCers reasoned that their critical fan labor holds greater capital because it runs alongside authorial intent, deciphering clues planted by complicit showrunners. Simply put, the stock value of their labor rested on fan-author synchronicity. That is why, though financially unremunerated, TJLCers were convinced that the dividends of their fan labor, when finally reaped, would be exceedingly rewarding—because at its core lay the subculture's legitimizing compensation of "being right" where the mainstream majority was "wrong."<sup>25</sup>

Apparently contradictory, this radical group's alignment with a corporate power structure further evinces the vulnerable desperation underlining representation-starved queer audiences. As one twenty-two-year-old lesbian user remarks, queer fans "idolized" *Sherlock*'s creative team "because deep inside your depressed gay little heart you thought they were staging a revolution in your favor."<sup>26</sup> The case of TJLC shows that, in their eagerness for positive TV representation, LGBTQ+ fans (particularly young ones) can be painfully susceptible to self-detrimental and power-skewed alliances.

Restrictive as it may appear, these fans' teleological political agenda is rooted in a form of queer fan labor that is both socially driven and care-based. TJLCers still believe that outing Sherlock and John as a romantic couple on worldwide television can propel ideological shifts in national attitudes and global awareness, resulting in broader social equality for everyday queer people. They repeatedly claim that "Sherlock and John are not just a ship. It's a cause." Beekeeper, a British, bisexual, female blogger in her fifties, goes as far as proposing that, due to its massive viewership, the show can prompt a transnational revision of cultural homophobia:

When johnlock becomes realised to every viewer of *BBC Sherlock*, it will change things. . . . The world is one huge audience now. . . . A global show . . . will influence opinions and images. Children will grow up only ever

knowing Holmes and Watson as a couple. New adaptations will need to expand on the homosexual marriage. . . . Major events on film and television change cultural perception, . . . and the revised version is the generally accepted reality. . . . We are witnesses to that cultural shift of image. You will tell your grandchildren. It's bloody brilliant.<sup>27</sup>

The queer utopianism infusing TJLC fanworks is shaped by a strand of collective fan labor often dismissed by mainstream sources as self-indulgent and overemotional: that of protest, in this case against toxic heteronormativity. The marked presence of protest labor in the TJLC community demonstrates that the ludic pleasure of online “shipping” and the civic labor for forwarding social justice campaigns can coalesce around notorious fictional figures such as Holmes and Watson.<sup>28</sup> Borrowing the term from fan activist Andrew Slack, Henry Jenkins describes the “practice of mapping the fictional content world onto real-world concerns” as a form of “cultural acupuncture.” Popular among youth online fandoms, this collective process of cultural retroversion “helps empower young people to become civically [*sic*] engaged and politically active” by making issues as complex as structural inequality and gender discrimination relatable and manageable once shaped around the familiar narrative of beloved characters. Jenkins defends the practice, arguing that self-defined fan activists are politically significant in “social movements” because they employ their power as consumers to bring awareness to civic issues.<sup>29</sup> I add to Jenkins’s observations by suggesting that, as TJLC demonstrates, triggering sociopolitical awareness through mediated self-identification can be construed as labor—a neglected and unremunerated kind of interpretive fan labor especially formative for marginalized consumers, and hence deserving of scholarly attention and industrial recognition.

#### NEGOTIATING NEURO-DIVERGENCE: SHIPPING AND SELF-CARE LABOR

When shipping non-heteronormative male-identified characters like John and Sherlock, girl fans further enact an additional form of unrecognized labor: that of diagnostic self-care. In her influential article “Femininity and Adolescence” (1984), sociologist Barbara Hudson notes that, since Western culture idealizes adolescence as a “‘masculine’ construct,” young femininity is cast as its derivative—the lesser, lacking identity.<sup>30</sup> As a result of growing up feeling inadequate in their female selves, Hudson argues, girls tend to either surrogate male attributes connoted with excellence, such as athleticism (for instance tomboys), or embody the negative traits (superficiality, consumption, ornamentation) culturally associated with femininity (“girly girls”).

Such ingrained bias influences women's engagement in online fan communities. Though the recent mainstreaming of "geek culture" has somewhat eroded these strict gender divides and encouraged more girls to openly express their gaming and media preferences, the long-lasting cultural messages intimating that femininity is incompatible with masculinized success and worth continue to shape how girls are socialized.<sup>31</sup> Internalized gendered scripts, therefore, play a key role in understanding queer girl fans' mobilization of television depictions of m/m romance to articulate their own non-heteronormative identities. Male queerness, especially the type personified by characters such as the socially challenged Sherlock Holmes and invalidated war veteran Dr. John Watson—adult men who have experienced addiction, mental illness, and trauma, and hence do not conform to the conventional image of invulnerable heterosexual masculinity, but who have nonetheless found success—provide queer female viewers with an accessible entry point to inhabit a male subjectivity that, according to Hudson's theory, would seem both empowering and inaccessible.

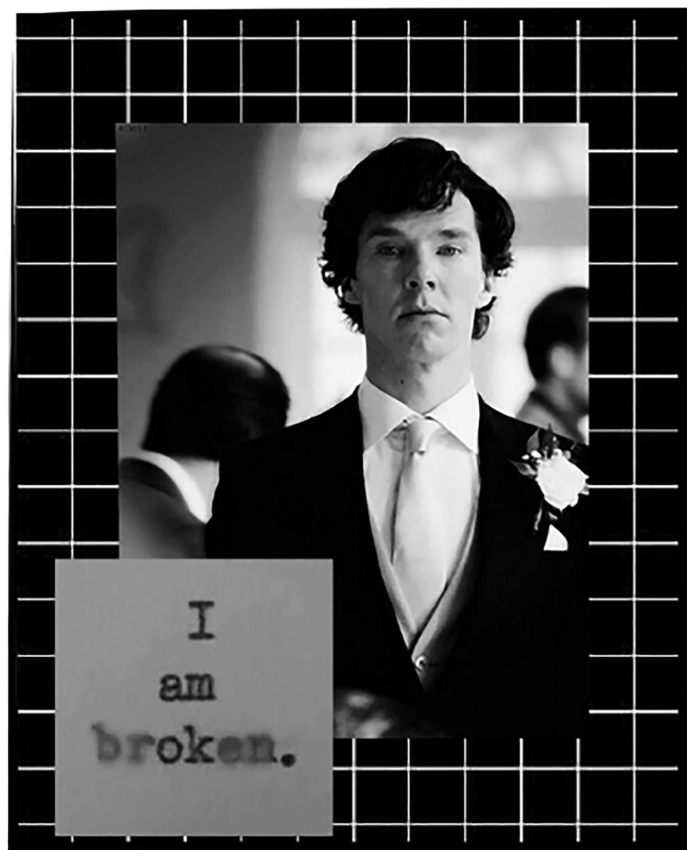
Identifying with Sherlock and John through the diagnosis of their queerness (being their non-heteronormative sexualities or neuro-atypical psyches) thus constitutes a textured form of fan labor, a therapeutic heuristic that validates girl fans' difference while also destabilizing deified (and essentialist) paradigms of infallible masculinity. Case in point, "#that's me" or "#same" are the most recurrent hashtags attached to posts where Sherlock cries, acts autistically, or pines over John, a tagging trend that evidences girl fans' willing identification with the character due to his shame-free display of historically feminized and denigrated traits such as sensitivity, emotionality, and neuro-divergence.

Queer girl fans on Tumblr, in sum, wield creative labor as a means to reclaim female-coded "lesser" emotions, while negotiating internalized shame and self-doubt resulting from an oppressive legacy of compulsory heterosexuality and pathologization of female subjectivity. Using images of m/m sexuality to work through female disempowerment is not a new fan practice, as Joanna Russ's seminal study on *Star Trek* slash writing demonstrates.<sup>32</sup> Displacing this reception practice to Tumblr, however, does significantly expand the modes of emotional and heuristic labor afforded to girl fans invested in m/m intimacy. Tumblr's marriage of traditional crafts, confessional writing, and peer grouping with digital technology, real-time immediacy, and remote networking fosters a unique breeding ground for highly sophisticated queer content. More specifically, Tumblr affords a somewhat safe venue where alternative terminologies for

gender and sexual identification can be tested and communally performed, including aro/ace, demisexual/demiromantic, wlw, sapphic, nonbinary, and so on.

In other words, *Sherlock*'s queer Tumblr community offers insight into how niche social platforms like Tumblr have helped nonnormative viewers articulate their idiosyncratic identities by building upon established fan practices. In particular, Sherlock's displacement and mental fragility in season 3—resulting from his abrupt return to London after years away battling criminals, and the failure to reestablish his domestic partnership with John—supplied girl fans with a framework to safely visualize and discuss neuro-atypical behavior. For example, in 2016 whodoctorholmes created a digital collage juxtaposing Sherlock's pained face at John's wedding with the typed caption: "I am broken," to which madgirlspoem added months later: "You and me both, sweetheart" (fig. 1). Whodoctorholmes' fan art aptly renders visible the heuristic and self-care labor performed through queer reception. Blurred at the edges, the adjective "broken" can be read as "ok," an aesthetic choice suggesting that mental health diagnosis is a process of self-excavation, a parsing through layers and veneers not unlike that of coming into one's queerness. Likewise, through the digitally bricolaged image, fan artist, character, and Tumblr user all coalesce in identifying with a state of "broken" difference cloaked under a performance of "okay" normalcy. This virtual round-robin illustrates how stranger-fans spontaneously collaborate across time and mediums to forge a language that recognizes and normalizes negative affective states—in itself a type of communal and self-care work.

Once again "cultural acupuncture" intersects with fans' creative-heuristic labor and queer utopian agendas. For TJLC fans, their public celebration of neuro-divergent, non-heteronormative male figures threads together a political collective that actively pushes against a patriarchal society that continues to uphold white, wealthy, heterosexual, professional, physically and mentally fit cis men as the cultural standard for strength, success, and self-pride. By promoting a different kind of masculinity—one that remains male-coded but is defined by "feminized" vulnerability, emotionality, and fallibility—these fans are advocating for social change and self-empowerment. John and Sherlock may be white, Western men of certain privilege, and hence far from ideal models of diversity, but they are world-renowned paradigms of Britain's idealized national identity, cultural artifacts that stand for white patriarchy and imperial power. Transforming these characters into positive embodiments of affects long disparaged as "feminine" and "deviant" is, for queer girl fans, a major step toward cultural legitimization, worth the sacrifice of racial, gender, and class diversity.



madgirlspoem:

| You and me both, sweetheart.

🔄 madgirlspoem Source: whodoctorholmes

FIGURE 1. Digital collage by whodoctorholmes, 2016.

In the end, reclaiming male icons and male-penned narratives as resonant female-oriented queer content is labor, as is working for utopia, social acceptance, and self-knowledge in heterosexist, ableist, and elitist societies. As a microcosmos, TJLCers and Johnlockers demonstrate that queer viewers can weaponize consumer culture to challenge essentialist stereotypes that still restrict what is socially expected and encouraged of individuals based on their biological gender, sexual preference, and mental health status. To perform such transmutative work,

however, fans must draw from their emotional, cognitive, and creative reserves. It matters, then, that media industries publicly acknowledge that this type of invisible fan labor and skill is not without merit or expenditure.

#### READING BACKWARD: QUEER CRYPTOGRAPHY AND MAKING QUEER LOVE VISIBLE

On February 15, 2016, San (hereatjohnlockhell), a twenty-five-year-old *Sherlock* fan from Australia, mused on her Tumblr: “What if . . . Season 4 happens backwards—starting with the Johnlock kiss and then telling the rest of the story?” To make the queer subtextual manifest and the unvoiced proudly outspoken, *Sherlock* girl fans reach backward, employing digital technology to turn the television canon inside out. Although conventionally associated with devolution and obsolescence, nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggests that reading “backward” can be an illuminating epistemological tool: though “it must be lived forwards, *life must be understood backwards*. . . . Life cannot ever be fully understood exactly because there is no single moment where time stops completely in order for me to take [that elucidating] position: *going backwards*.”<sup>33</sup>

Language is the scaffolding of fan communities. On the English-speaking side of Tumblr, subverting language is central to group dynamics. Neologisms, portmanteaus, acronyms, and abbreviations create a sense of belonging as if through secret code. As cannibalcoalition notes, “We purposely mangle, misspell, and interrupt the name of a person or thing on Tumblr to avoid a post being found in tags or searches.”<sup>34</sup> For queer fans, language-making and code-breaking become thus as intrinsic to their experience as online users as to their practice as television viewers. I propose that “reading backward” is a prime example of queer cryptography at work, of girl fans employing inversion (linguistic, textual, structural) to “break through” heteronormativity. Aided by digital technology, inversion becomes then both a literal and a critical lever to push against the heteronormative grain and crack open the queerness of mainstream texts.<sup>35</sup>

A video created by twenty-four-year-old Jacky (waitingforgarridebs) captures queer fans’ “reading backward” protocol in all its cryptographic richness. The video uses audio from the last installment of season 2, “The Reichenbach Falls” (2012) and superimposes it onto a scene from “His Last Vow” (2014), the season 3 finale. In both episodes Sherlock falls to his death near John. In “The Reichenbach Falls,” Sherlock’s suicide is

fabricated but unbeknownst to John, so the audio track captures the doctor's gut-wrenching reaction to seeing the detective tumble from the top of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. In "His Last Vow," Sherlock is shot and momentarily dies. The scene featured in the fan video is filmed from inside Sherlock's mind, depicting his inner struggle to return to life once he realizes that John is in danger. By literally reaching backward, Jacky pulls audio from a past episode and overlays it with a correlated future scene, not only highlighting the circularity of the television narrative, but also exposing the ongoing unspoken narrative of queer pain, repression, and love that characterizes Sherlock and John's interplay. In this way, the fan's "audio swap" opens up the subtextual queerness, bringing it into the forefront.<sup>36</sup> Once superimposed, John's desperate cry in season 2 becomes the diegetic sound rousing Sherlock's from the dead in season 3, his voice transformed in a figurative kiss of life, an aural queer mouth-to-mouth.

Another example of queer cryptographic labor can be found in girl fans' splicing of linear narratives into GIF sets, reversing their chronology to make queer attachment visible. TJLCers' reading of the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia" (2012) presents such a case. TJLC fans propose that the season 2 opener is an ingeniously crafted mirror-written episode, whose intentional queer subtext can be easily brought to the surface through queer cryptography. "A Scandal in Belgravia" introduces Irene Adler, a character usually presented in television and film adaptations as Sherlock Holmes's love interest. TJLCers, however, argue that *Sherlock* deliberately subverts viewers' heteronormative expectations regarding the narrative structures of romance—as well as knowledge of the popular sexualization of Irene and Sherlock's rapport—to queer the television narrative. Though cast as a viable sexual partner from the beginning of the episode, Irene's flirtatious advances are insistently situated as a means to achieve her own professional ends, not to fulfill amorous agendas. Sherlock reciprocates in kind. By the end of the episode, the two never engage in anything but stimulating mind games; they remain identically superior wits striving for intellectual dominance, not sexual companionship. According to TJLCers, Irene's erotic function in the BBC show is thus not to confirm Sherlock's heterosexuality, but to "out" John and Sherlock's unspoken queer attachment.

Accumulating more than seventy-six thousand notes (reblogs and likes) by 2017, a GIF set fashioned in 2013 by a sixteen-year-old girl (ohsherlockgifs) employs a literal take on Kierkegaard's philosophical proposition of "reading backward" to prove this point (fig. 2). The fan excerpts screen grabs from



Isn't it beautiful how the dialogue makes so much more sense when read backwards?

Backwards. Yes backwards is better.

(Source: ohsherlockgifs, via 221bstarktower)

FIGURE 2. GIF set by ohsherlockgifs, 2013.

a confrontation between Irene and John at the Battersea Power Plant and rearranges their conversation backward. In the original scene, Irene lures John into a secret meeting and, after professing to being “gay,” flaunts her courtship of Sherlock. Irene’s disclosure ultimately forces John to confront



his own non-heteronormative attachment to the detective in the following exchange:

JOHN: You . . . flirted with Sherlock Holmes?!

IRENE: At him. He never replies.

JOHN: No, Sherlock always replies—to everything. . . .

IRENE: Does that make me special?

JOHN: I don't know. Maybe.

IRENE: Are you jealous?

JOHN: We're not a couple.

IRENE: Yes you are. . . .

JOHN: If anyone out there still cares, I'm not actually gay.

This GIF set illustrates how the labor of queer cryptography is enabled by digital technology—whether through a paid graphics editor like Photoshop, a free online program like GIPHY, or an iPhone app like 5SecondsApp. With the aid of one of these programs, the fan extracted six screen grabs from the scene, added closed-captioning across the bottom, and reversed the order of the dialogue so that John's denial of homosexual identity ("I'm not actually gay") becomes undermined by Irene's assertive confirmation ("Yes you are"). The fan's reworking of text and image also undoes John's negation of same-sex coupledness ("We're not a couple") with a tentative confession of erotic jealousy ("Are you jealous?" / "I don't know, maybe").

More poignantly, this GIF set highlights that queer cryptography is, at its core, a cumulative form of labor, reaching its fullest potential through collaboration with other fans. Cannily aware of the subversive power of reading texts backward, twenty-one-year-old Sabrina from Italy maximized the subversive voltage of the digital montage by adding: "Isn't it beautiful how the dialogue makes so much more sense when read backwards?" to which seventeen-year-old Emily from England responded: "Backwards. Yes backwards is better."<sup>37</sup> In line with Fathallah's argument that *Sherlock* is a text that lends itself to "destabilizing heteronormative performances of masculinity," these girl fan-makers are working to forge "queer disruptions . . . [by] making use of double meaning and gaps in language" inserted by the show's writers.<sup>38</sup>

Through the labor of queer cryptography—its jimmying of language via digital collage and critical viewership—Tumblr queer fans enter into a long-lived queer tradition of "converting" heterosexual texts into legible LGBTQ+ representations. This translation work, as various scholars have noted, is a common reading technique learned by queer viewers growing up surrounded by

heterosexual media.<sup>39</sup> Digging for latent queer narratives, fleshing out spectral forms of nonnormative representation through Tumblr blog posts, videos, and GIF sets, is labor—an unrecognized type of reception labor that queer viewers have been tasked with by virtue of existing within heteronormative societies. However, queer fan labor also pivots around traditional structures of power as fans jockey for official recognition and authorial status historically denied to young women and queer viewers. Upending televisual texts, in the end, allows *Sherlock* girl fans to muscle their way into a male-dominated canonical narrative, concurrently acting as *unofficial decoders* of the show's subtext and as *official coauthors* of dominant fan theories. Through the roles of simultaneous translators and conspiratorial decoders, queer rehabilitative labor is ultimately performed.

Further, it bears note that most fan practices employed by queer viewers, including erotica writing, collaging, and drawing, have a history of being deprecated as “women’s work”—sentimental, domestic, and unprofitable.<sup>40</sup> Yet as communication scholars Leslie Shade and Kylie Jarrett point out, social media companies reap enormous profit from emotional and invisible labor, which is largely undertaken by a poorly paid or unwaged workforce of young female users, fans, bloggers, and interns. Shade and Jarrett also alert to a direct correlation between the generally accepted devaluation and precariousness of “women’s work” and the high profitability of male-led tech companies, most conspicuously Facebook.<sup>41</sup>

Although Tumblr’s queer users may not be picking up brass scissors and homemade glue, they are, like their pre-internet ancestors, engaging in a feminized form of labor: craftwork. Craftwork allows girl fans to enter into an interactive culture of multimedia reappropriation and to depict nonnormative identities. Digitally cut and pasted again and again, the official images of John and Sherlock become virtual paper dolls, fluidly manipulated within the scrapbooked loop of information that is Tumblr. In an animated GIF by Sherlockspeare, a twentysomething female fan living in China, we can see how empowering a hands-on manipulation of licensed material can be (fig. 3). Cropping a still from “The Blind Banker” (2010), the fan inserts her own hand into the visual narrative and picks up Sherlock’s scissored image as one would a paper doll. Through slow-motion animation, she then pushes Sherlock onto a static John, actualizing TJLCers’ wish to see the two men kiss on-screen. Since the show creators continue to withhold m/m sexual contact, Sherlockspeare bodily rearranges the official narrative through her digital labor. Using craft practices habitually associated with women’s work, the girl fan is able to



FIGURE 3. Animated GIF set by Sherlocksppeare, 2015.

penetrate a heterosexual canon and queer male bonds, her puppeteering hand becoming, in its disembodied omnipotence, equivalent to the hand of God. Sherlocksppeare's intrusive appendage ultimately enacts a radical maneuver, rendering female fan labor and queer subtext unmistakably visible, while reminding showrunners and TV networks that once a text is released into the world, audiences gain power to have their way with it—remake it, remix it, and queer it up for their own viewing pleasure.

#### **USING LANGUAGE TO QUEER POWER: BROMANCE AND FOUND FAMILIES**

Once again, language emerges as an instrument of subversion in queer girls' fanworks. Challenging mainstream linguistic formulae carries multiple valences, one of the most obvious being that of asserting control over a narrative that has, from the beginning, been in the hands of male creators and critics. One of the ways queer girl fans push back against dominant hetero-patriarchal readings of the Holmesian canon is by systematically challenging the "bromance" tag that scholars, journalists, and showrunners insist on attaching to John and Sherlock's rapport. Fans read this linguistic descriptor as an inherently homophobic attempt to shut down queer readings of male intimacy. Resistance to the "bromance" tag is best captured in a May 24, 2014, post by mamalaz. Tagged "#johnlock," the defiant post has collected thousands of notes on Tumblr.

“You call it bromance,” it reads. “I call it the all-consuming, soul-destroying, never-ending one true gay love of all time.”

To buttress their linguistic pushback, queer girl fans draw examples from the televisual text. They interpret Sherlock’s pained reactions to John marrying Mary Morstan as telltale signs of queer rejection, pointing out that the detective’s visible heartbreak and pining throughout season 3 are “textbook” symptoms of a queer individual being refused by a “straight friend”—a formative “shitty queer experience” legible to any queer viewer of the show, according to gloriascott93, a bisexual, middle-aged British fan.<sup>42</sup> The hurt of rejection in the face of compulsory heterosexuality is such an elemental part of queer experience and its lexicon that girl fans can deploy it as a trope to convincingly argue against any claims that Sherlock’s investment in John is merely “bromantic.” Responding to Sherlock’s blatant despondency, a female Tumblr blogger remarks: “Bromance is supposed to be ‘not sad.’ Sherlock’s sadness [at John’s wedding] is really made more excruciating and raw [because it] is the rejection every queer person experienced.”<sup>43</sup>

Acknowledging that pain, shame, and unrequitedness are an integral part of coming into a queer identity is therapeutic labor, as is using fan-made collages and confessional blog posts to deny queer erasure under the noncommittal, heteronormative mask of “bromance.” Fideliant’s photo edit illustrates fans’ demand for the explicit visibilization of queer experience and its negative charge (fig. 4). Jerry, a twenty-two-year-old medical student, takes a verse from “Detail of the Fire” (2015) by the gay poet Richard Siken and places it under a screen grab of Sherlock’s aborted love confession in “His Last Vow.” The caption prompts: “Let’s admit, without apology, what we do to each other.”<sup>44</sup> In challenging the bromance rhetoric, Fideliant and other girl fans are working for the legitimate recognition of all the emotional labor that goes into negotiating a queer identity in predominantly heteronormative societies.

Another way queer girl fans employ language to labor against heteronormative patriarchy is through the formation of virtual “found families.” Many TJLCers call show creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss “our dads,” and John and Sherlock their “sons.” Through these terms of endearment, queer fans establish a nonreproductive, nonlinear family unit where young cis and non-cis female viewers are simultaneously mothers of adult men and fathered by a male non-couple. A pictorial example of this queering of reproductive terminology can be found on a family tree diagram drawn by an eighteen-year-old girl of color. On top of the drawing, Moffat and Gatiss appear labeled as the fan’s progenitors, while a two-pronged arrow designates Sherlock Holmes and John

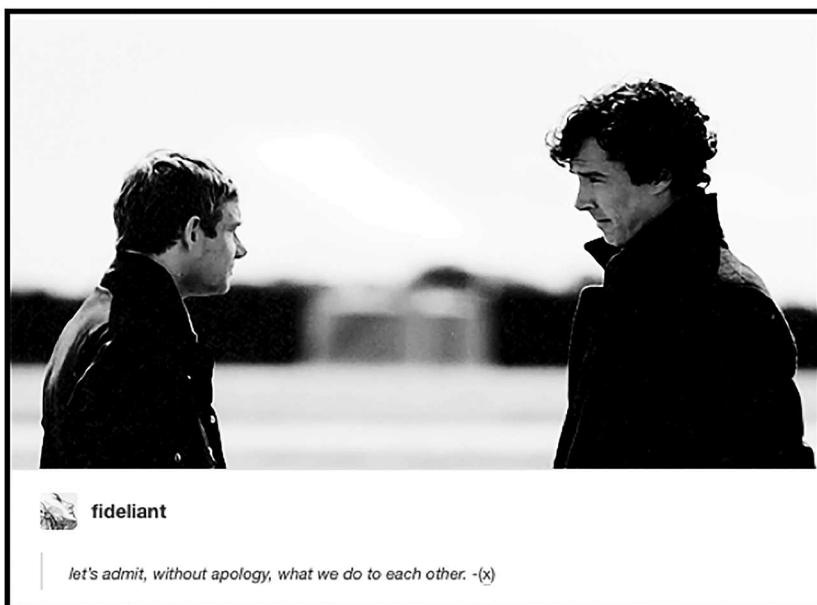


FIGURE 4. Photo edit by fideliant, 2016.

Watson as the fan's children. The caption indicates that the digital diagram should be read as "a record" of the fan's "ancestry and progeny."<sup>45</sup>

By subverting reproductive language, *Sherlock* girl fans form a mediated family where chosen role models supplant arbitrary blood ties, where an out gay man (Gatiss) and his heterosexual male ally (Moffat) partner up to "give life" to a global network of queer girl fans. Tumblr, acting as the midwife (and the playpen), brings them all together, engendering a new structure of queer kinship. These blended family configurations also echo Lee Edelman's "anti-reproductive futurism," a queer theory challenging the heterosexual couple and its offspring as the template for "the good life."<sup>46</sup>

Exercises in subversion, these rearranged family trees further elevate young female viewers into unusual positions of power. Instead of being the "bastards" of mass culture, female consumers become the rightful heiresses to their male idols' brainchild (the show), as well as the progenitors and protectors of Britain's prized cultural artifacts: the genius Sherlock Holmes and the intrepid John Watson. Casting the writers as their parents also legitimizes historically devalued voices. As twenty-nine-year-old Emily states, "when johnlock is canon our dads get to publicly be like 'maybe *don't write off everything young girls and queer people say*, you fuckwads."<sup>47</sup>

A takeover of heterosexist patriarchal power is thus enacted in these female-led Tumblr communities. By shifting their typical positioning as clueless mass consumers to knowing co-conspirators, girl fans insert themselves into the inner sanctum of media production, a guarded elite traditionally inhabited by male executives, creative directors, actors, and screenwriters, the institutional structure largely behind *Sherlock*.<sup>48</sup> Trying to take control of the “official” narrative is also a particularly bold maneuver in the face of the tumultuous relationship Moffat and Gatiss have cultivated with Johnlock shippers over the years, most recently accusing female fans of trivializing LGBTQ+ media representation with their obsessive, lecherous fetishization of John and Sherlock’s relationship.<sup>49</sup>

### QUEERBAITING: MARKET STRATEGY, CIVIC ACCOUNTABILITY, AND THE WAGES OF FAN LABOR

Though intended as a self-empowering maneuver, after season 4 premiered and dashed fans’ hopes for an explicit m/m romance, many TJLCers felt that instead of being elevated by their filiation into a manufactured patrilineal family, they had been instrumentalized for ratings and corporate profit, unwittingly participating in the aggrandizing of patriarchal power and male ego. Faced with the confirmation of queerbaiting, in January 2017 *Sherlock* fans congregated online to express betrayal, vulnerability, and self-doubt, responses not unlike the emotional damage victims report after having fallen prey to a fraudulent scam.

Queerbaiting, however, does not happen in a void: prompting and participation are required. At the same time that LGBTQ+ fans publicly vied to gain autonomy over the official television text through queer cryptography and craftwork, affiliates of the show—namely BBC Three, the now digital channel targeting young viewers—capitalized on their queer affinities, creating Tumblr and Twitter accounts that interacted with fans and released posts promoting seasons 3 and 4 (fig. 5). Often including fan-made GIFs, several of these posts alluded to Sherlock and John’s romance, describing the characters as being “so married it’s ridic [*sic*],” and encouraging viewers to “Get ready for #Sherlock to spin John around and tell him to gaze into his eyes!”

Having an official BBC affiliate participate in the queering of television simultaneously retained girl fans’ consumer engagement while gatekeeping their involvement. Tumblr posts like the Morse code line spelling “John and Sherlock Forever” released by BBC Three in April 2016 were conspiratorial winks that acknowledged queer girl fans, but only in the cryptic language of ciphers and in the subcultural fringe that are fan-gear spaces. On mainstream



FIGURE 5. Chain of messages between BBC Three’s official Twitter account and two Johnlock female fans, where the affiliate fosters the possibility of being part of TJLC, 2014.

outlets, however, *Sherlock* showrunners continued to lampoon queer readings of the show as female-generated “gay porn” and “irksome” fantasies of seeing two men “going off into the sunset together.”<sup>50</sup> The duplicitousness of such discourse becomes correlated to its channels of dissemination, then, so that speaking positively of queerness and girl fans remains, in 2017, encouraged only in niche sites. This turns Tumblr in a digital speakeasy where young minorities congregate to dream up utopian tomorrows made of public visibility, agency, and equity. Participation in the online community ultimately empowers their voices while also reaffirming their segregation from mainstream arenas.

Queer girl fans, however, deliberately embrace this liminal positioning—moving within fan subcultures while constantly interacting with mainstream culture. I call this positioning “differential assimilation,” a cultural strategy that

upholds peer-based and identity-driven subcultural divisions without a distinct divorce from mainstream culture. In this way, Tumblr girl fans have significantly grown away from the youth subcultures of male punks and Teddy boys immortalized in Dick Hebdige's ethnographic research.<sup>51</sup> Unlike their British predecessors, girl fans on Tumblr do not strive to be perceived as countercultural outsiders. Openly consuming mainstream media while engaging in a niche internet conspiracy to expose the queer subtext of a "quality TV" show, *Sherlock* girl fans thrive on duality. For most of them, the pleasure of differential assimilation is being able to wear two hats at the same time: mass viewer and subcultural cryptographer.

Girl fans' interstitial positioning, furthermore, does not free them from social stratification or entrepreneurial capitalism. Though subversiveness and empowerment underpin their queer reception practices, *Sherlock* girl fans gleefully participate in the corporate commercialization of fan affect, creativity, and leisure. More and more often, popular content creators attach links to their Tumblr pages, encouraging other bloggers to "buy them coffee" via PayPal or support their creative labor through Patreon and Ko-fi donations. At the same time that fans exchange fiction and art free of charge on their blogs, they also sell their designs through the online stores Etsy and Redbubble, consume a myriad of licensed tie-in merchandise, and attend paid conventions organized by affiliates of the show. This means that even though many *Sherlock* fanworks are created and shared freely on the Tumblr-sphere, queer girls' gift economy does not exist separate from corporate capitalism or monetized exchange.

Acknowledging girl fans' complex relationship with neoliberal media structures and mainstream culture highlights the extent of their accomplishments. Rendering John and Sherlock's same-sex love visible in fan productions is a feat of multifarious queer labor: a testimony to the work of imagination and storytelling, of retroversion and heuristics, of individual craft and communal caretaking—largely invisibilized and unpaid forms of feminized labor that are, nevertheless, pivotal to the maintenance and subsistence of online fandoms and, in an age shaped by social media interactivity and transmedia storytelling, vital to the profitability of new TV shows. These collective methods of queer reception labor are also a power grab, a fan tactic for leverage against distant and despotic showrunners who contemptuously attempt to exploit and foreclose nonnormative readings of their texts.

Social justice-driven fan communities such as TJLC ultimately harness their collective queer labor as a means to regain a modicum of creative control over a corporate-produced narrative that is completely beyond their reach, yet has such



emotional hold over their everyday lives. Becoming the decoders of the queer subtext, the harbingers of the secret gay romance, infuses female fans with immense authorial power, as well as a measure of retroviral control over the toxic misogyny spewed by the male creators' public disparagement of engaged female viewers. As a lesbian blogger suggests, queer female fans on Tumblr have so integrally taken over authorship of the BBC series that they have obliterated the power of male authorial intent. "I've actually stopped ever expecting another series of *Sherlock*," therealmartinsgrrrl stated in July 13, 2016. "This is just what Sherlock fandom is. *There's no show. There's just us. There's fic and meta and art and speculation and there IS NO SHOW*," to which sakibatch added, "BBC's Sherlock is just an illusion. *We are Sherlock. We are the show*."<sup>52</sup>

Activism, in the end, plays a salient part in online queer fandoms. Yet the highest risk queer fans can incur in investing so much emotional capital (collectively and individually) into a TV show—in upholding it as a forthcoming beacon of social justice for a marginalized demographic—is to overlook that the cost of their labor is ever-growing and that its nonmonetary rewards are always precarious. Not only is the maintenance of queer utopian labor demanding during a show's run and its lengthy hiatuses, but it can become painfully steep after the show's conclusion, particularly when explicit queer representation is foiled.

As season 4 aired in January 2017, *Sherlock* queer fans faced the erasure of its prior homoerotic subtext and the reinforcement of misogynistic and homophobic tropes (the graphic death of a female protagonist, the glorification of heterosexual abusive relationships, the queer-coding of villains, to only name a few). Surrounded by the abovementioned marketing campaigns that hyped homoerotic readings of the show, *Sherlock* finally confirmed its much-speculated queerbaiting agenda. Queer fan labor, until then grounded largely in cryptographic and craftwork, mutated quickly into care work, with hundreds of Tumblr bloggers scrambling to provide therapeutic support to young LGBTQ+ viewers who felt bankrupted and further invisibilized in their nonnormativity by the show's rug-pull. For months, fans exchanged suicide hotline numbers, produced "fluffy" fan fiction as soothing gifts, and organized letter-writing and social media campaigns across several platforms to raise institutional awareness regarding the psychological and social injury that media queerbaiting inflicts on queer viewers.<sup>53</sup>

Queer female fans' managerial and care labor not only went unaddressed by the show creators and the BBC, but also generated criticism from sections of the general audience who, echoing Moffat's early accusations, blamed female fans for bringing grief upon themselves through their narrow-minded, queer

cryptographic standpoint. Once again, female viewers were ridiculed for their “hardcore” spectatorial investment in representations of same-sex intimacy, their labor elided under claims of compulsory heterosexuality and accusations of emotional excessiveness. Through their shaming rhetoric, these critical voices also laid bare the essentialist double bind long imposed on women: that to care deeply is a woman’s job, but caring too much is a woman’s weakness. At last, the complicit participation of a gay male creator (Gatiss) and a gay actor (Andrew Scott) in such an elaborate queerbaiting scheme also threw a harsh spotlight on the deep-seated misogyny still threading through the LGBTQ+ community, a realization that added to the deterioration in well-being of at-risk queer female-identified viewers.

It is well known that the price to pay for loving is vulnerability. Free fan labor is, at heart, a high-stakes gamble, always risking dissatisfaction, heartbreak, and corporate manipulation. But for queer viewers, and more so for those who are underage, loving media is an especially vulnerable position to occupy because their emotional fan labor is given too readily at the promise of public recognition, valorization, and approval. For many young queer viewers, media is the principal source of escapism, as well as the sole safe gauge for self-discovery. For creative media industries to knowingly poison those waters is to deliberately poison an unprotected constituency whose potential profitability simply cannot justify the collateral damage.

Agency is a double-edged sword, though. The decision to offer up one’s non-financial resources—time, emotional bandwidth, creativity—to a mass media enterprise may be voluntary, but it is also not without strings, in spite of emergent channels of mediated interactivity (such as Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr real-time Q&As) indulging the illusion that fans and media producers have reached a more even playing field. Queer reception labor practices, as ingrained and organic as they may initially appear, are not without accountability, but they are not without worth, either. Yet they remain unappreciated by showrunners and network stakeholders, flagrantly so if we consider the cases of queerbaiting and the killing off of LGBTQ+ characters still proliferating in Anglo-American television programming.<sup>54</sup>

Love is priceless, as advertisements and postcards keep telling us: you give it away and take it from others, willingly and free of charge. But when publicity campaigns and television shows profit from the emotional, creative, and managerial labor of a historically vulnerable demographic without rewarding it with as little as respect, demands must be made. For when the cost of loving runs so high, shouldn’t notions of civic responsibility and fan exploitation be

reevaluated so that laurels—as dividends and indemnities—can be more equitably distributed? ■

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## NOTES

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1. Richard Siken, *Crush* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 62.

2. Steven Moffat, "The Fabulous Baker Street Boys," *Empire*, January 2014, 157.

3. "Slashing" is a fan-coined term historically used to describe the sexual coupling of two male figures. Originally popularized by female fanfiction writers surrounding the TV cult series *Star Trek* (CBS, 1966–69), the term literally refers to the punctuation mark "slash" (as in Kirk/Spock or Holmes/Watson). The slash symbol is now primarily employed in digital communities to flag fanworks containing same-sex romantic content, graphic or otherwise. However, in fanfiction tags, nonsexual queer pairings are often announced through an ampersand (as in Holmes&Watson). "Subtextual scanning" is a locution I use to convey the reading practices queer audiences have historically deployed to retrieve same-sex representation from mainstream media. See Terry Castle's and Patricia White's scholarship on lesbian moviegoers reappropriating Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo as legible queer icons: Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Through groundbreaking, these works focus on a single sexuality (lesbian) and a specific medium (cinema) during a period in US film history marked by morality-based censorship (the Hays Code) and unilateral modes of film production (star and studio systems). In this paper, I aim to open up notions of queer identification and fan reception through the analysis of transmedia television, social media subcultures, and non-heteronormative female viewers.

4. David M. Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2 (2003): 334.

5. "Johnlock" is the fan-coined portmanteau signifying the romantic coupling of John and Sherlock.

6. Another key trait of the Johnlock Tumblr fandom is users' constant reportage that parsing *Sherlock's* queer subtext galvanized the discovery of their own queerness.
7. Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 48.
8. Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television and New Media* 9, no. 1 (2008): 33.
9. See Abigail De Kosnik, "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 118–24. De Kosnik makes a compelling case that fanfiction writers should be remunerated as a means to avoid the exploitation of non-copyrighted creative fan labor, a proposal that aims to particularly protect women, since a majority of fanfiction authors identify as female.
10. Judith Fathallah, "Moriarty's Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC's 'Sherlock,'" *Television and New Media* 16, no. 5 (2015): 491.
11. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
12. For more on the pathologization of fan identities see Joli Jensen, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9–29.
13. Jonathan Heaf, "This One Direction Interview Got Us Death Threats," *British GQ*, August 24, 2015, accessed January 2, 2016, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/one-direction-gq-covers-interview>.
14. See Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking over the World* (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2013); Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis, *Fangasm: "Supernatural" Fangirls* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013); Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).
15. Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do! Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 182.
16. Laura U. Marks, "Straight Women, Gay Porn, and the Scene of Erotic Looking," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 40 (March 1996): 127.
17. An interesting exception is Francesca Coppa's article on female fans appropriating the BBC sleuth as a relatable model of asexuality. However, Coppa does not specify if these female viewers are aromantic, sex-repulsed, or experience opposite-sex romantic attachments (e.g., heteroromantic, biromantic, et cetera). Francesca Coppa, "Sherlock as Cyborg: Bridging Mind and Body," in *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*, ed. Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 210–23.
18. See Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 611–26; Bryce J. Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself . . . Where I Can Speak My Mind: Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media and Society* 17, no. 9 (2015): 1513–29.
19. For more on Tumblr as a "queer ecology" see Alexander Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Susanna Paasonen and Ken Hillis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 43–57.

20. Deactivated, December 2015.
21. Pacwarbuff, *Sherlock* IMDb board, January 26, 2016; Dracopyro, Reddit thread, May 21, 2015. It can be argued that the masculinization and traditionalism of Reddit and 4chan directly correlates with the feminization and progressivism of Tumblr. Erin, a twenty-year-old self-described “feminist” and “social justice warrior,” mentions on her Tumblr blog that “You can literally just smell the Reddit on some boys,” to which a female follower added: “#and 4chan too” (erinthesails, accessed June 5, 2016).
22. February 15, 2016. I leave typos and other grammatical inconsistencies found in online fan posts unchanged to reflect users’ unique modes of self-expression. Quotes from named handles are used with fans’ permission. Anonymous quotes are either from deactivated accounts or are obscured to protect users’ privacy.
23. According to the TJLC Fandom Demographic Survey conducted on Tumblr in 2016, of the 1,079 people who responded, about 85 percent were between thirteen and twenty-nine years of age. About 80 percent identified as nonheterosexual, and more than 90 percent identified as women or “woman-aligned”: <http://tjlc fandomsurvey.tumblr.com/post/151904267054/2016-tjlc-fandom-demographics-survey-results>, accessed October 17, 2016.
24. It is their politicized certainty and voracious queer labor that distinguishes TJLCers not only from other *Sherlock* Tumblr communities, but from major female-driven fandom invested in pairing two male characters in a romantic relationship. The *Supernatural* fandom, for instance—an enormously popular m/m online fandom, known for its active dialogue with creators and cast—is not as explicitly linked to a social justice campaign for LGBTQ+ rights as *Sherlock*. This may be in part because *Supernatural*’s creative team does not include as many out queer people as the BBC series does, namely co-creator Mark Gatiss, actor Andrew Scott, and director Rachel Talalay.
25. For more on the gendered scripts underscoring the distinctions between “amateurism” and “professionalism” see Brooke E. Duffy, “Amateur, Autonomous, Collaborative: Myths of Aspiring Female Cultural Producers in Web 2.0,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 1 (2015): 48–64.
26. atikiology, July 12, 2017.
27. January 31, 2016.
28. “Shipping” is a fan-coined term popularized in the mid-1990s by *The X Files* followers. It describes fans’ investment in seeing two characters romantically involved. Also it must be noted that the upholding of Sherlock and John as a “social cause” evidences a broader trend on Tumblr, where social justice has come to frame, and often police, fan discourse and art circulated online.
29. Henry Jenkins, “‘Cultural Acupuncture’: Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012): 1, 3.
30. Barbara Hudson, “Femininity and Adolescence,” in *Gender and Generations*, ed. Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava (London: Macmillan, 1984), 35.
31. See Kristina Busse, “Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 73–91.

32. Joanna Russ, "Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love," in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Feminist Essays*, ed. Joanna Russ (New York: Crossing, 1985), 79–99.
33. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journalen* (1843), trans. Palle Jorgensen (Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, 1997), 303, my emphasis.
34. February 29, 2016.
35. It is no surprise that Tumblr became the main social platform where "reading backward" reception practices are rehearsed. On Tumblr, the most recent posts appear first on a user's dash, while older posts unspool down the screen in a chronologically reversed cascade of information. Due to this setup, Tumblr *structurally* forces its users to scroll backward in time in order to connect with their followers and mutuals.
36. "Audio swap" is the term used by the girl fan. February 15, 2016, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://waitingforgarridebs.tumblr.com/tagged/meswaps>.
37. 221bstarktower, 2014; onitboss, 2015.
38. Fathallah, "Moriarty's Ghost," 495.
39. For more on queer viewership and their reading practices see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
40. For scholarship on the feminization and consequent devaluation of care work see Paula England and Nancy Folbre, "The Cost of Caring," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 561 (January 1999): 39–51; Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
41. Kylie Jarrett, "The Relevance of Women's Work: Social Reproduction and Immaterial Labor in Digital Media," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 1 (2014): 14–29; Leslie R. Shade, "'Give Us Bread, but Give Us Roses': Gender and Labour in the Digital Economy," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 10, no. 2 (2014): 129–44.
42. April 17, 2016.
43. don-gately, June 23, 2015.
44. An acclaimed poet, Siken publicly endorsed "Johnlock" shipping. He joined the Tumblr fandom in March 2015, gave interviews on the topic, and reported writing Johnlock fanfiction, though he never published any online. See his archive at <http://richardsiken-poet.tumblr.com/>.
45. This user prefers to remain anonymous.
46. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.
47. teapotsubtext, April 20, 2016, my emphasis.
48. *Sherlock's* creative team is dominantly male. Of more than a dozen writers, producers, composers, and directors, only three are female-identified: queer director Rachel Talalay, who lensed the first episode of season 4, and executive producers Beryl and Sue Vertue.

49. See Roth Cornet, “Steven Moffat and Benedict Cumberbatch on the Sexualization, Tumblrization, and Fetishizing of the Doctor and Holmes,” *IGN*, February 8, 2014, accessed January 2, 2016, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/02/08/doctor-who-sherlock-steven-moffat-benedict-cumberbatch-on-the-sexification-fetisization-tumblrization-of-the-doctor-holmes>. Gatiss and Moffat’s distaste for female fans coupling Sherlock and John together is legendary. In addition to inserting a mocking scene in “The Empty Hearse” (2014), where such slash fantasies are personified by a delusional young female fan, Moffat has reportedly remonstrated that John and Sherlock’s is “not *that kind* of a relationship [i.e., homosexual]. You know, it’s kind of limiting—why do we have to make it [about] sex? The show is *certainly* a love story. It’s just not a sex scene.” Steven Moffat at Clapham Picture House screening of BBC *Sherlock* “The Great Game” and Q&A, January 6, 2011, posted May 8, 2014, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://skulls-and-tea.tumblr.com/post/85117826461/moffat-the-thing-about-sherlock-holmes-is-youve>. If there is resonance in Moffat’s message, there is also a lingering ghost of Victorian Puritanism, idealizing platonic attachments and denigrating sexual desire as the insidious contaminator that dirties up the purity of nonphysical love. In a post-Brexit UK, one has to wonder if this rhetoric does not mask a rising moral panic regarding male homosexuality and the corruption of Britain’s national legacy.

50. Valerie Parker, “SDCC 2016: Sherlock and a Case of Sexual Identity,” *With an Accent*, July 27, 2016, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.withanaccent.com/2016/07/27/sherlock-a-case-of-sexual-identity/>.

51. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979).

52. My emphasis.

53. “Operation Norbury,” the major fan-led *Sherlock* campaign against BBC’s queerbaiting, is ongoing on Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. You can track it at #OpNorbury.

54. Recent examples of the “bury your gays” practice include *London Spy* (BBC, 2015), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–16), *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–ongoing), and *The 100* (CW, 2014–ongoing), while *Supernatural* (WB/CW, 2005–ongoing), *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011–ongoing), and *Merlin* (BBC, 2008–12) have all drawn accusations of queerbaiting.